Transitions and Transformations in Selected Short Stories from Northeast India

FINAL SYNOPSIS

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In Northeast India, the struggles over land have led to different forms of claiming the land in ways that are not always congruent with official definitions of nations, states and borders. Through the selected works, the thesis attempts to show how the stories from Northeast India act as alternative narratives challenging older narratives that showcased the land as a primitive one in order to justify the spatial re-arrangements of the land throughout colonial and post-colonial times. The selected narratives present transitional and at times transformative interstitial spaces. The thesis also aims to look at how the characters make sense of the place through their interstitial positions.

Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* examines the meanings associated with space, he looks at how space attains different meanings based on the cultural context. He divides space into the three categories of perceived space, conceived space and the lived thirdspace that can alter the understanding of the popularly perceived and officially conceived space.

One of the primary ways in which space is considered in the thesis is in the interstitial sense encountered in the third space. The concept of interstitial space has been used from the Bhabha's formulation of liminality and the "Third space" and Edward Soja's "Thirdspace" derived from the works of Lefevre. The term "Liminal", from which the concept of the interstitial arises, derives from the field of psychology and anthropology. The concept of interstitial space was theorized by Homi K Bhabha. It comes from the concept of Liminality derived from the Latin word "Limen", meaning "threshold". The thesis analyses selected texts to locate interstitial spaces of transformation and transition.

The thesis looks at five short-story collections by different authors from Northeast India. All chosen texts were published within the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone* (2005) and *Laburnum for*

My Head (2009), Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006) were published in the first decade of the twenty-first century and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*: *A Collection of Short Stories* (2017), and Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* (2019) are from the second decade of the twenty-first century. As such, the stories are set against the same socio-historical background and hence provide useful points of comparison. The stories share the commonality of dealing with the making of a sense of the place as the land the characters inhabit undergoes change. In all of the collections there are stories that fuse in elements of the oral tradition of the land with the everyday reality of the people. Such aspects shared between the collections led to the selection of the above-mentioned texts for this study.

The first chapter, the collection of stories in *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* by Temsula Ao, deals with the lives of Naga people as they transition to being part of a statehood from a stateless society. Ao's stories give instances of encounters between people in contact zones. Through the encounters her stories become the medium through which alternative perspectives are formed in interstitial spaces that aid in the transformations of the people and the land. The text also looks at how characters have made sense of the place with the changing spatial arrangement of their communities and how making sense of the place or not being able to make sense of it acts as a starting point of transitioning perspectives.

In the second chapter, *Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai, there is a focus on the in-between land/space created through the stories of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The stories reveal relations to the land that have not always been given due importance. *Legends of Pensam* consists of nineteen short stories, yet the stories are presented in such a way that the texts make overtures to the novel form. The characters in the stories are from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh and their lives are connected through their relation to the land. The text is composed of stories that portray characters who belong in an interstitial space in-between

myth and reality. The aspects of their oral tradition play an important role in deciding their everyday life. For the characters a sense of place is achieved through the incorporation of their myths into the realities of the day. Such a coming together of myth and reality opens up interstitial spaces for the characters to form diverse and alternative relations to the land.

The fourth chapter, *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat, looks at how people locate themselves with respect to the city of Shillong through colonial and post-colonial times. The stories become important as they portray the multiple layers of existence experienced in the everyday lives of the characters. There are multiple realities that co-exist in the stories of the land that lead to the formation of interstitial space. In such spaces people with different perspectives find a common ground. The text is chosen as its characters whose lives are in one way or the other closely linked to Shillong question the exclusivist identity of belonging. The building of the town Shillong as a hill station by the British was to be the paradoxical site for refuge and surveillance. The characters in the stories try to make sense of such a place that went through rapid changes imposed on the land from time to time. The work portrays encounters between people who live in the different layers of reality and look for alternative, interstitial spaces that help them transform with the changing relations between the people and the land.

The fifth chapter analysis *His Father's Disease* by Aruni Kashyap. The text raises questions on the kind of spatial arrangements designated to the land**.** Assam was already an established kingdom when the British arrived unlike the stateless societies of the hills surrounding it. The text becomes important as it questions the existent dominant discourses. Kashyap calls the land 'a diseased, broken rotten state' and his characters are seen inventing interstitial spaces that provide an alternative to the existent relation to the land in order to make sense of the space they occupy.

The concluding chapter sums up the different aspects discussed in the core chapters. The chapter elaborates on how the selected short story collections engage with different discourses on the land and how the stories portray in-between interstitial spaces that at times arise from the ambiguities of the overlapping of different perspectives on the land. There is also an attempt to understand how in situations deemed strange or previously unknown people form interstitial spaces that provide alternatives to existing categorizations. The chapter tries to show that it is in these unexpected encounters that some of the most transformative spaces are made. The chapter discusses how the authors have used different approaches to show the transformation accompanied with the changes sweeping across their land. Their positioning in the interstitial spaces, between imagined and real boundaries, is also dealt with in the chapter.

The study becomes an important contributor in understanding the literature from Northeast India as being a genre that needs to be analysed in close association with the land. The study of literary works form Northeast India based on spatial analysis will present new perspectives that can help look at the problems faced throughout the world in new light. Research advancements in the area would lead to the location of spaces of radical openness.

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